

Interview 57

This interview was conducted by the Middle East and Middle Eastern American Center (MEMEAC) of The Graduate Center, City University of New York (June 2002 – March 2003).

Gender of respondent: Female

Age: 19

Q. I'd like to start by asking you a few questions about yourself. Where were you born?

A. New York City.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. New York.

Q. Where were your parents born?

A. Afghanistan.

Q. So you would be second generation.

A. Yes.

Q. What do you consider to be your ethnic background?

A. Afghan.

Q. What is your religious affiliation?

A. Muslim.

Q. And how old are you now?

A. Nineteen.

Q. You're a U.S. citizen. Right?

A. Yes.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. I have my high school diploma.

Q. Oh, okay. Are you attending college?

A. Yeah. I'm attending college.

Q. What college?

A. Queens College.

Q. And what is your main occupation besides ... apart from being a student, do you work?

A. I help out my sister in her job; help out my father; work home.

Q. Alright. And are you single, I suppose?

A. Yes, of course.

Q. Now I would like to ask you about your experience of September 11th. Where were you on that day around 9am and how did you hear of the attacks?

A. I was getting ready for school and my Mom was watching the news. And she thought it was ... it was joking around and she goes: Oh, look! And I'm like, that's ... that's the Twin Towers. You know? And then I called my sister-in-law: Oh look. You know? It's ... it's the Twin Towers. And then we both see the ... the other plane hit and we're like. ... It looked like a fly but then, like, we were like, that's pretty big. You know? And we saw an explosion and we were like, wow! We just saw the second plane hit. That's when we realized it was a terrorist attack or it was initi--like, done--you know--for a purpose.

Q. So what was your first reaction when you saw this on TV or you heard about it?

A. I was shocked. You really can't take something like that in--you know? It was too real.

Q. Right. So was there anything in your mind telling you, okay, these attackers are Muslims?

A. No.

Q. What is your most vivid memory of September 11th? What is it that you will never forget about that day which will always stand out in your mind?

A. After I went to school ... my school is right a river away from the Twin Towers and you could see the Twin Towers falling. I ... I saw that and I ... I was like, I'll never forget that. But then when I went to my father's store, 'cause he had picked me up--you know?--he was a little worried--he goes they are already ... they had bombed Afghanistan, and I was like, that's what I'll never forget that without knowing anything, the first day that that happened, they bombed Afghanistan.

Q. You actually saw the Towers falling?

A. Yeah.

Q. From your school?

A Yeah.

Q. You were getting ready in the morning. So you still ended up going to school? They didn't cancel classes or anything?

A. No. They didn't cancel classes.

Q. What were your feelings about what happened immediately afterwards? Did you feel sadness, pain, grief, anger?

A. A little bit of sorrow and anger, a little bit of both.

Q. And who were you angry at?

A. In the beginning I was ... I was angry--you know--how they could ... who in their right mind would want to bomb so many people? You know? Who would have the power or the audacity to do something like that?

Q. Bomb ... you mean bomb Afghanistan or attack the World Trade Center?

A. Attack the World Trade Center. And then, towards the end of the day, after feeling sadness I was like ... I was sort of feeling anger because they didn't know who it was, like, a 100% sure, they just started bombing Afghanistan and I didn't think that was right.

Q. Did you feel any guilt being a Muslim and being from Afghanistan knowing that everything was being associated with your country and with your Muslim people?

A. Not really 'cause Muslims around the world, I'm sure, felt the same way. And I can't take responsibility being an Afghan because I know the people who ... who committed the act of crime weren't Afghan.

Q. Have your feelings changed since the events, this feeling of sorrow and ...

A. I have sorrow for--you know--the families who've died. That's about it.

Q. When Americans asked you about your ethnic background before September 11th what did you tell them?

A. I was Afghan.

Q. And how about immediately afterwards?

A. There ... you know, my friends used to say aren't you, like, a little scared to tell everybody ... anybody you're Afghan? I was, like, no. Anytime they didn't ... no one knew I was Afghan or Muslim 'cause--you know--they didn't think I looked it. But after I ... they told ... I told them I'm Afghan no one would believe me. I'm, like, take it for what it is. You know? I'm telling you I'm Afghan. It's--you know ... nobody ... till this day some of, like, my close friends don't believe me. Yeah.

Q. So you still say you're from Afghanistan now?

A. Yeah, of course. You know?

Q. Have your feelings towards the United States changed since 9-11?

A. Not ... not really. I just think that not America, but just some people in America have too much pride. They take freedom not for what it's worth, but, like, they expect more from this country. Like, if you go to the Middle Eastern countries, we would not be able to leave the house without ... without a covering, without a man by our side. You know? But in this country we have the equal rights as anybody else.

Q. Right. What about your level of political awareness? Has it increased or decreased since 9-11?

A. Definitely increased because--you know--on TV every channel: ... Now ... now more than ever there's more outreach programs--you know--to, like, help you.

Q. Do you feel a sense of belonging here in the United States? Do you feel at home here?

A. Here... I was raised here. This is where I grew up.

Q. Have you always felt like this?

A. Yeah. I've always had this opinion.

Q. Do you think that there has been a change in the way people from the Middle East and South Asia have been treated since 9-11?

A. Not really.

Q. You don't think so? You think people are still treated the same?

A. I think they've always been treated, like ... like they've always been treated.

Q. Good or bad?

A. Well, it matters where you are. Some places are bad.

Q. Have you personally experienced any backlash, discrimination or racial profiling?

A. Oh, of course. You know? Being an Afghan girl in New York how could you not be? You know?

Q. But you just mentioned that people really don't think that you're Afghani. So would you like to briefly explain or describe your experience?

A. I was on the city bus coming home from school--it was, like, a week later--and there was these two--you know—American-looking people sitting right behind me. And we were ... the bus had stopped and we were in front of an Indian restaurant and--you know--there were Muslim men with turbans, with the beard, and wearing the attire. So I was just looking at them--you know--not thinking anything. You know? You look at everybody. The ladies behind me go, oh, look at that. How could you want to kiss that? Don't they ... don't they shave? Don't they wash themselves? And me being the loud mouth that I am, I turned around and I was, like, who could kiss you? I'm, like, look at yourself. You're ... you know—'cause they were ... they were large. And if they're going to pick on somebody because they have a beard, why not pick on you because of your weight. You know? You're ... you're not special. I was very bothered that they

Q. I see. So has any member of your family experienced any backlash?

A. Not of my knowledge. It's because I've al--I always ask my mother--you know--does anybody bother you outside? Because I have ... I have friends in the area and I know how they are. They pick on--you know--anybody that they could, the elderly, the sick ... and so I always tell her if anybody bothers you, you tell me and--you know--don't worry. I ... I got you.

Q. You're going to be the big bully?

A. No. I've got to stand up for Mama Dukes.

Q. Yeah! Absolutely. So do you think that the Middle Eastern and South Asian organizations have been effective in handling this backlash? Have they been able to mobilize and organize the community?

A. I ... Not in this area. I haven't seen anybody helping out. You know? I just think--you know--the meshties [religious leader], they try

Q. The mosques? The meshti . Okay.

A. They ... they try to raise money--you know--for the children back there. I forgot. One of the ... the Red Cross. I see they're helping more in the Middle East more than they have ever.

Q. Have you joined any ethnic or religious organization ever since 9-11?

A. No.

Q. In your opinion what do you think the nature of the relationship between your ethnic and religious group is with others in the United States at this time? Do you think that, let's say, for example, Afghans and the Jews, the Muslims and the Hindus, or the Muslims or the Jews are more harmonious and tolerant towards each other or...

A. Oh, of course not.

Q. You think they're more strained and oppositional?

A. Yes, very strained and oppositional, I think now more than ever, because the Muslims blame the Jews because--you know--it's ... it is pretty odd that all the Jews took off that day. You know? Like, it wasn't no religious holiday. And to my knowledge it wasn't on a Friday 'cause I know Fridays they go and pray.

Q. It was a Tuesday.

A. Yes. And the Jews blame the Muslims, the Christians--you know--I don't ... I really don't have much Christian friends. But--you know--like, in a time of war everybody points the finger so you really can't base your answer of--you know--just because I'm Muslim I'm going to--you know--protect my Muslim ... it's also, you have to be fair.

Q. What do you think members of your community can do to improve these relations with these other groups?

A. To get more knowledge out there, to help people out to understand--you know? Just because you're Jewish doesn't mean you're special. Just because you're Muslim doesn't mean--you know--you're a terrorist.

Q. Given your understanding of the Middle Easterners and the South Asians in the United States at the time, after September 11th, would you still encourage these groups to emigrate to the United States?

A. Oh, most definitely. It's way more freedom here. Not from personal experience but--you know--I have family in other countries. And just to see how much freedom we have here, we definitely take it for granted.

Q. We have talked about the negative consequences of September 11th. Do you think there was anything positive that stemmed from these events?

A. I ... Yeah. I guess you could say there's more educational facts out there, people helping you. There's more people trying to help kids. 'Cause before, I never saw no--you know--commercial about helping the Muslim kids. I've always saw [sic]--you know--help the Christian kids in--you know? But what struck me the most was the first time in my life, a couple of months ago, I saw help the Muslim kids in the Middle East. I was, like, wow! I was, like, you know it has definitely impacted on the U.S.

Q. So you think there's more visibility and an improved understanding of the Muslims and the Arabs and Islam itself?

A. Yes.

Q. Okay. Why do you think the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon happened? Do you think the Arabs or the Muslims in the Middle East hate America, maybe that's why?

A. I think it's more of revenge more than anything.

Q. Revenge for what?

A. Just--you know-- ... nobody knows really what goes on in their minds. Everybody has their own opinion. But I just think it's because the U.S. has hurt other places in the past and it's just an act of revenge. I think the ... the attacks went on because America helps Israel more than it does Palestine. Like, it hurts me to know that--you know--they all ... they all take Israel's side when Palestine really needs ... really needs more help. They're hitting people with stones and the other side has ... they have guns. You know? It's not right to ... to tell, like ...

Q. It's not a fair war, you mean?

A. Yeah. It's definitely not a fair war.

Q. What do you think the United States can do to resolve this issue of terrorism, which is directed against it?

A. Guess they can start with the President by trying to start war because it's ... you know, like, the economy needs more money and then they're going to go to war. Public schools are not in their best shape, and ... and I know because I went to some of the really bad public schools. I go to a public school where, like, I'm surrounded by four projects. You know?

And starting college, like, you see more diverse ethnicities and more culture and, like, you could definitely see that going from public school to college is definitely a difference. And you know public school is not the best education you could have.

Q. So apart from diverting it's attention from war, what else do you think the U.S. can do to resolve terrorism?

A. Equality.

Q. Amongst who?

A. Among ... actually, amongst everybody. Because I have a couple of friends and--you know--their ... their appearance might not be the best but when they go looking for job ... --'cause we all went looking for jobs at the same time—I went in, asked for a job, I got a call back a week later telling me to come back. My ... my--how should I say--my Haitian friend, she went in and she said--you know--wanting to get the job. She said she didn't get no call back; no nothing.

Q. But how can this help resolve the issue of terrorism? Because this is amongst a particular sector. But what do you think the American government can do to improve or to eliminate this terrorism which is directed against it?

A. How they can help?

Q. Yeah. I mean, certain individuals can play their part...

A. Yeah.

Q. But what do you think the government as a whole can do?

A. Just to get ... I really don't know--to get more information out there 'cause I see that ... that we're more diverse now than ever but still a lot of discrimination is ... we still don't have that much information out there. You know? 'Cause I know a lot of people that they

... they see Muslims and they're like, oh, they're ... they're terrorists because their knowledge ... they don't know ... I used to tell ... I remember when I was in junior high I used to tell my friends I'm from Afghanistan and they'd be, like, where? What? Like, yeah, it's in the Middle East somewhere--you know-around those countries. And now if I tell them that I'm from Afghanistan they're like, Oh, what part? You know? Like, they know.

Q. Okay. Have you traveled after September 11th by plane?

A. No, not by plane. I've never traveled on plane. I took the car--you know--to Canada and you see they discriminate a little but--you know? Then again, I wouldn't blame them.

Q. So do you think that the security measures which you've seen put about nowadays, if they were put in place prior 9-11 that the attacks could have been prevented or the impact could have been decreased?

A. No. I don't think so 'cause if they knew that they were doing this the terrorists would have definitely found another way to bomb us or attack us. You know? And killing Osama Bin Laddin really isn't a solution because I'm sure that there are many more like him. He has many children, many followers.

Q. Okay. Are there any other issues or points you'd like to comment on that we haven't covered in this survey?

A. Not really. We've covered mostly everything.

Q. Okay. Well, thank you for your time and your responses.

A. You're welcome.